

**NEAL COOKSEY**  
**Crosby's Fish & Shrimp, Charleston, SC**

\* \* \*

Date: September 12, 2014  
Location: Back deck of Crosby's Fish & Shrimp, Charleston, SC  
Interviewer: Sara Wood  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: Twenty-three minutes  
Project: Lowcountry Maritime

**00:00:00**

**Sara Wood:** So this is Sara Wood with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's September 12, 2014. I'm out here in James Island. We're at Crosby's Fish and Shrimp and I'm sitting here with Mr. Neal Cooksey. Mr. Cooksey I'm wondering if you would go ahead and say hello and introduce yourself, tell me who you are and where we are right now.

**00:00:21**

**Neal Cooksey:** My name is Neal Cooksey. We're over here—this is Folly Creek on James Island. And we're just sitting out here enjoying the nice pretty sunshiney day. [*Laughs*]

**00:00:34**

**Sara Wood:** Tell me where you just were?

**00:00:36**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh down at the boat putting nets on and changing the oil and getting ready for tomorrow or Sunday that kind of stuff.

**00:00:45**

**Sara Wood:** And Neal can you tell me your birth date for the record?

**00:00:47**

**Neal Cooksey:** September 30, 1961.

**00:00:51**

**Sara Wood:** You got a birthday coming up?

**00:00:52**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah. I'll be fifty-three. *[Laughs]*

**00:00:57**

**Sara Wood:** Neal can you just start by telling me where you grew up—?

**00:01:02**

**Neal Cooksey:** I grew up right here on James Island about five miles down the road. And I've worked these creeks about thirty-nine years and about it, you know. *[Laughs]* It's—I been to Texas, Key West for two years, Texas two years, and probably will go back to Key West probably another couple months. That's you know you just got to go where you got to go to make a living.

**00:01:32**

**Sara Wood:** How did you start doing this?

**00:01:35**

**Neal Cooksey:** My brother. He did it for probably two years before I started and I worked for him for seven years. And then I started running my boat—my own boat in 1980. So been a long time, all kind of memories—hurricanes. Rode out nine hurricanes, Hurricane Hugo in Charleston Harbor—that was fun. *[Laughs]* Did all kinds of things.

**00:02:09**

**Sara Wood:** Why did your brother—do you know why your brother—is your brother Johnny is that—?

**00:02:13**

**Neal Cooksey:** Right, yeah he got started. He worked at General Electric as a welder and he didn't like welding in that warehouse, the dust [*Noise from generator in the background*] and stuff you know so he quit that and started working on the boat and he retired last year. He was forty years in and he retired. But I can't retire yet. [*Laughs*] I wish I could.

**00:02:37**

**Sara Wood:** How old do you have to be to retire?

**00:02:39**

**Neal Cooksey:** Probably when I die. [*Laughs*] Been a long time.

**00:02:46**

**Sara Wood:** So did you get into this because you watched him and you thought it was something you'd like to do?

**00:02:48**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah, back in the old days it was good you know. The price of fuel was seventeen cent a gallon and see, about seventeen years ago I bought an eighty-foot boat and seventeen years ago it was forty-eight cent a gallon and then we had 9/11 and then the fuel prices

kept going up and kept going up you know during that 9/11 so now it's \$3.20 a gallon to the boats and it's tough to make it but you know you still got to go. But been a long road.

**00:03:26**

**Sara Wood:** Do you remember your first day out there?

**00:03:30**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh yeah.

**00:03:30**

**Sara Wood:** Can you tell me about it?

**00:03:32**

**Neal Cooksey:** I was—well I started scalloping. I was in school and I took off for the weekend and every two days I'd make about 500 bucks back in 1975, you know 500 bucks every day. I said, "Shoot, this is—"

**00:03:53**

**Sara Wood:** Scalloping?

**00:03:53**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah, this is good money here, so—. But anyway that's it—all kinds of things.

**00:04:01**

**Sara Wood:** Can you describe for people who aren't familiar with this kind of work, what is it—can you describe what it's like to scallop, what you have to do?

**00:04:09**

**Neal Cooksey:** Just long hours, you know it's hard work. It's—it ain't easy. That's why the same guys is with me now 'cause it's not easy.

**00:04:20**

**Sara Wood:** Can you tell me the names of the people who go out with you?

**00:04:23**

**Neal Cooksey:** Bubba Jameson and Calvin Chavis. They been going for a long time.

**00:04:32**

**Sara Wood:** How important is that relationship? It seems like you have to really trust the people you go out with.

**00:04:37**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah, it's like a family. We work together. But it's stuff you got to do, you know just you got to trust them.

**00:04:50**

**Sara Wood:** When you're out scalloping are you out on the boat? How does that work?

**00:04:55**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah, we're out there scalloping and we leave—well we did leave out of Charleston Harbor and we run down Savannah and scalloped there. We'd bring the scallops back in Charleston Harbor, Shem Creek, unload them, take a day off and go back out. But it was—like I say it was really easy work, just long hours, you know sixteen-hour days and that kind of stuff. But we did that for winter and then we took off and went to Texas in '77 [1977], Key West '77—'78 [1977-1978], '80 [1980] all along there you know '79 [1979] and worked down in the Gulf.

**00:05:36**

**Sara Wood:** Were you scalloping or were you catching all kinds of—?

**00:05:38**

**Neal Cooksey:** We was shrimping back then, rock shrimping, white shrimping, brown shrimping, pink shrimp all that down in the Gulf back then. And the Gulf is still doing good. Over here we got the diseases right now that's hurting us real bad, but we got to keep trying.

**00:05:56**

**Sara Wood:** What are the diseases?

**00:05:59**

**Neal Cooksey:** Well they come from—my theory is they come from the shrimp ponds about twenty years ago. It just—like them tiger shrimp come out of the shrimp ponds and the guys let loose. They—they probably stay around the rest of our lives, but they been out for about six

years now. But you know it's several different kinds of diseases come out of those ponds but they—they're taking us down one-by-one, you know. Like right here it used to be fifteen boats right here tied up. Now it's only two—two of us, so—and over at Backman's there was—they had ten boats and now it's—you don't see no boats right now tied up. But going downhill quick—the price and fuel and stuff, but you just got to try and hold on and work at it.

**00:06:47**

**Sara Wood:** What keeps you from just throwing in the towel?

**00:06:51**

**Neal Cooksey:** I don't know. [*Laughs*] Stubborn I reckon. Sometimes you know like this past week was good but we had a month it was bad—bad shrimping and the spring we had a real good spring, and a decent summer, but we had one bad month this past month but it's knock on wood it picked back up—I hope, I hope. We got Santa Claus coming not too far away. [*Laughs*]

**00:07:18**

**Sara Wood:** Neal I have a few more questions for you is that all right?

**00:07:23**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah.

**00:07:24**

**Sara Wood:** You said you got your start on Shem Creek?

**00:07:26**

**Neal Cooksey:** Right, well my brother tied up down in Rockville for seven years, but then we went to Shem Creek and worked that winter and then we took off out of Shem Creek and went to Texas, so—. But I started in Shem Creek with him.

**00:07:41**

**Sara Wood:** What was Shem Creek like back then?

**00:07:42**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh my gosh it was wide open like seventy boats in there and now you got what like seven out of seventy. It was just the good times back then.

**00:07:54**

**Sara Wood:** Was it mostly white fishermen down in Shem Creek?

**00:07:57**

**Neal Cooksey:** No, probably half and half, yeah, probably half and half.

**00:08:04**

**Sara Wood:** I'm wondering you said—were your parents involved on the water at all or this started with your brother?

**00:08:10**

**Neal Cooksey:** My brother, yeah.

**00:08:11**

**Sara Wood:** Yeah.

**00:08:14**

**Neal Cooksey:** They had—it was a dock over there across the river years ago we built and they sold it and to the clam farm and then the clam farm sold it to the developers and that kind of stuff, but me and him had a dock over there. And—

**00:08:29**

**Sara Wood:** The two of you?

**00:08:30**

**Neal Cooksey:** Right, then my wife—I met my wife over here so I moved over here thirty years ago.

**00:08:35**

**Sara Wood:** Can you tell me how you met Joanie?

**00:08:38**

**Neal Cooksey:** Seen her on the dock and—way it is, but—

**00:08:46**

**Sara Wood:** She used to go out—she used to go out right?

**00:08:49**

**Neal Cooksey:** She used to work with me for—me and her worked together for two years by ourselves, yeah. But—

**00:08:56**

**Sara Wood:** What was that like?

**00:08:58**

**Neal Cooksey:** It's [*Laughs*] kind of tough but it wasn't bad. [*Sighs*] Oh man. I'm hot. But like I say it's—I wouldn't know what to do what else you know. The water is where I'm at.

**00:09:23**

**Sara Wood:** What was the difference—you came from—you said you started in Shem Creek and you've traveled around the Gulf and you went down the Gulf but you came back here. What were some of the differences did you find like between a place like James Island and Shem Creek?

**00:09:37**

**Neal Cooksey:** That ain't no difference there. What the difference is we go over to Texas. Texas is a whole another ball of wax. Talk about hot, it will be 120 degrees in the daytime over there. The ocean will be as slick as this creek here during the day and hot. And back then we didn't have no—no water pump on the boat, no air-conditioning on the boat. We had to pump water by hand. Take a shower with—everything, it was—did it for seven years. But now we got all the conveniences of home now you know—pump water and air-conditioning and [*Laughs*] you

know. I don't mind staying for 10 days nowadays but back then it was tough you know. Like going to school back in those days we didn't have air-conditioning in school so—. Part of life. We didn't know no better. But—

**00:10:31**

**Sara Wood:** So you mostly shrimped your whole life?

**00:10:34**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah, shrimped and crabbed.

**00:10:36**

**Sara Wood:** Do you still crab?

**00:10:37**

**Neal Cooksey:** No, I pick oysters sometimes but I'm getting too old for that, too but—

**00:10:41**

**Sara Wood:** It sounds like backbreaking work.

**00:10:42**

**Neal Cooksey:** [*Whistles*] Yeah believe me. We did a little bit of everything down here.

**00:10:47**

**Sara Wood:** Will you tell me—you were—you had the tiger shrimp down there and I'm wondering if you could talk about some of the kinds of shrimp you catch here.

**00:10:54**

**Neal Cooksey:** Well right—right around here we only catch the white row shrimp and then we catch the brown shrimp and now we're trying to catch white shrimp again but in the fall you know these tigers come out—come out of the creeks—that's something else but that's what I have—I might have had twelve dozen tiger shrimp for seven days but I have had as much as—about three years ago I had as much as a forty-eight-quart cooler full in ten days. It's you know it all depends where you're at. [*Laughs*] It's crazy.

**00:11:31**

**Sara Wood:** What's a good day? When do you know you've had a good day?

**00:11:32**

**Neal Cooksey:** Well average you like try to at least get 1,000 pounds a day to try to—'cause I burn about 200 gallons of fuel and that's—what's that \$620 so you try to get at least 1,000 gallons—1,000 pounds of shrimp and that's about \$2,000 then you got to pay your crew, so you try to get at least 1,000 pounds a day if you can—heads on you know try to.

**00:12:00**

But back in the old days you used could make money on five and all days when it was seventeen cent, thirty cent a gallon fuel but nowadays you got to try to set your sights a little higher, like I just came in and took my fifty-five foot nets off and put my seventy-foot nets on to try to catch more but you got to try to always catch more.

**00:12:23**

**Sara Wood:** Can you talk about how you shrimp like with the nets and for people who don't really understand how it works, how does it work?

**00:12:28**

**Neal Cooksey:** Well just you got doors and when you let the doors down in the water the water pressure opens the doors up and opens the nets up. You just got to know what you're doing.

**00:12:40**

**Sara Wood:** And you go—you go out into the ocean?

**00:12:43**

**Neal Cooksey:** Right, I go out there about—about a mile off of Kiawah Beach from a quarter mile to a mile, sometimes two miles just right off Kiawah Beach. And you're fishing down there off of Key West you're about—you're about twenty or thirty miles offshore down there. You—you can see the lights of Cuba and see the lights of the Keys when you're fishing down there. You see—see all kind of stuff, Cuba you know. A lot of pigeons them carrier pigeons go back and forth from Cuba to—to the islands, it's amazing.

**00:13:21**

**Sara Wood:** Does it just depend on what—how it's going? Does that kind of dictate how long you spend down there?

**00:13:28**

**Neal Cooksey:** Right, yeah it's just you know if you don't do nothing the first five days I usually come back in and take five off and come back—go back out. You know and like this— for this trip here, I stayed home for nine days and went out for seven. But then I need to get back in the ocean again 'cause it's—they're starting to run a little bit now. And I need to get out there.

**00:13:50**

**Sara Wood:** How does the season run here? Is it—?

**00:13:54**

**Neal Cooksey:** About May to Christmas, but I usually go start and go to—down to Florida probably around first of November and start going south 'cause the shrimp—white shrimp migrate on south. They stop about Cocoa Beach. That's where the white shrimp stop at. And then you go on down to Key West and you start catching pink shrimp down there.

**00:14:21**

**Sara Wood:** Do you like to eat shrimp?

**00:14:22**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh yeah, you eat it every week. [*Laughs*]

**00:14:25**

**Sara Wood:** Do you have a favorite kind?

**00:14:26**

**Neal Cooksey:** Well the white and the brown are about the best. The pink is—the pinks are not as good as our white and brown shrimp but—. You can't beat them. Lowcountry shrimp is good.

**00:14:41**

**Sara Wood:** What is the difference, people talk about getting the heads on and heads off. Why would somebody buy heads on versus heads off?

**00:14:47**

**Neal Cooksey:** Well they're cheaper 'cause we don't head them on the boat. Like last year we headed fifteen boxes of tails and we had ten boxes of head-on to sell to people for a special. We run specials for the week, you know, but we try to do that for specials and stuff, you know. My wife—my wife likes to head them so then she can peel them or sell them with heads off 'cause we get more money for the tails. But if you don't know what you're doing heading them you can get—like the other day I went out and had 600 pounds of tails. That's a lot of work, but them boys [*Laughs*]*—*them boys there they're good you know.

**00:15:26**

**Sara Wood:** And do you mean you actually take the tails off?

**00:15:28**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah, the—yeah pull the heads off, like I used—I used to work on the back deck by myself back in the '70s [1970s] but that's a job.

**00:15:39**

**Sara Wood:** What was that like? What are some of the things you had to do?

**00:15:40**

**Neal Cooksey:** Everything [*Laughs*]. Everything. Head them all, grade through them, everything myself. But I made money, I bought me a brand new corvette.

**00:15:55**

**Sara Wood:** What color?

**00:15:55**

**Neal Cooksey:** A red one back when I was sixteen years old.

**00:15:58**

**Sara Wood:** Sixteen?

**00:16:00**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah.

**00:16:02**

**Sara Wood:** You must have been proud.

**00:16:02**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh yeah.

**00:16:06**

**Sara Wood:** Was that the goal like you were going to save up money to buy a corvette?

**00:16:08**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah. That was it. All right. I don't know what else to say.

**00:16:17**

**Sara Wood:** Can I ask you a couple more questions?

**00:16:18**

**Neal Cooksey:** Okay.

**00:16:18**

**Sara Wood:** Okay, and then I know it's getting warm out here, so I'll—I just wanted to ask you about what did it feel like when you first—you bought your own boat and you were in charge versus being somebody working for somebody else? How did that feel?

**00:16:33**

**Neal Cooksey:** Scary. Yeah, 'cause like today I got to put on probably \$3,000 worth of fuel today and probably \$200 or \$300 of groceries and you hope you can pay for it you know. It's—it's a job. But—

**00:16:52**

**Sara Wood:** Everything you shrimp does it get sold here?

**00:16:55**

**Neal Cooksey:** I send some down to Beaufort [South Carolina] to my buddies in Beaufort and then send them off to a processor in—in Alabama. But most of the stuff we try to sell right here, yeah. And when I go down to Florida and catch big shrimp down there my wife comes down—she'll come down and pick them up and bring them back here in the wintertime. But and down in the Keys I just sell them down there in the Keys or Fort Myers, sell them over there in Fort Myers too. But—about it. [*Laughs*]

**00:17:29**

**Sara Wood:** Well Neal, you said you weathered nine hurricanes.

**00:17:32**

**Neal Cooksey:** Right.

**00:17:33**

**Sara Wood:** I mean can you talk about a particular day where you thought maybe you might, it rattled you a little?

**00:17:41**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh yeah, I mean every—all of them did. Well gosh I can't name them all. I mean Hurricane David in '79 [1979] and then well we had some in Texas. I seen a couple of

guys get killed over there. Then Hurricane Bob, well we had Hurricane Hugo before Bob but just, you know, Hugo was bad. I spent all night long on the back deck in Charleston Harbor blowing 150 miles an hour, counted nine hurricanes go by—or not nine hurricanes, nine tornadoes go by me. [*Low music comes on in the background*] But it's just something people need to experience once in their life. [*Laughs*] I've done it and it's not fun. But the best thing to do is don't leave the boat. Stay on the boat. That boat can blow up against that causeway or something and you're still safe you know. But don't ever leave your boat.

**00:18:39**

**Sara Wood:** Do you—turn the radio off?

**00:18:43**

**Neal Cooksey:** That's them boys in that boat.

**00:18:49**

**Sara Wood:** I just have one more question for you.

**00:18:51**

**Neal Cooksey:** Okay.

**00:18:51**

**Sara Wood:** What are the biggest challenges you have to face today?

**00:18:55**

**Neal Cooksey:** Today? Well what do you mean by that?

**00:19:01**

**Sara Wood:** I mean what are some of the things that you have to contend with now that you didn't have to when maybe you got your start besides fuel costs and everything?

**00:19:08**

**Neal Cooksey:** Well you had the fuel cost—the major thing. Just you know hope nothing don't happen. It's a big fear all the time, motor breaks down or something but just you know—. I don't know. It's everything. It's everything is with you or against you, one of the two.

**00:19:27**

**Sara Wood:** Do you remember the most exciting day you've had out there?

**00:19:30**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh yeah. I had two good days.

**00:19:32**

**Sara Wood:** Can you tell me a little bit about them?

**00:19:34**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh it's \$10,000 days and \$15,000 days and but you know they're few and far between. I mean some days you just anymore if you get \$2,000 days it's good you know. But back in the old days it was \$10,000 or \$15,000 days wasn't—you know wasn't too hard to get.

But now it's—you know I hate to have to start over again to do it that's for sure 'cause I wouldn't have none of this stuff around here you know. It's a job.

**00:20:06**

**Sara Wood:** What do you love most about it?

**00:20:10**

**Neal Cooksey:** Been doing it so long I don't know. Just doing it a long time.

**00:20:18**

**Sara Wood:** Do y'all get homesick out there?

**00:20:20**

**Neal Cooksey:** Oh yeah. Yeah you do, especially if you go to Florida you know go down there and work fifteen days—oh yeah. You get homesick. But you got to pay the bills. They never quit coming in. [*Laughs*] Every—every month the bills are coming. We got \$2,000 a month health payments and stuff. But so you got to keep going.

**00:20:47**

**Sara Wood:** Do you think about—do you want any of your—?

**00:20:54**

**Neal Cooksey:** [*Shakes his head no*] You just—it's too much, too much to teach them.

**00:21:01**

**Sara Wood:** Are any of them showing interest?

**00:21:06**

**Neal Cooksey:** Yeah, Nealie is but I told him, “No. You can't do it.”

**00:21:13**

**Sara Wood:** Well Neal is there anything else you want to add that I didn't ask you?

**00:21:17**

**Neal Cooksey:** Not right off-hand. I can't think about it. I'm just you know—it's been a long road.

**00:21:26**

**Sara Wood:** How old were you when you got your first boat?

**00:21:27**

**Neal Cooksey:** Nineteen. Well—

**00:21:36**

**Sara Wood:** I know that you've just come in and you've got a lot of stuff to do so I thank you for sitting with me and doing this.

**00:21:41**

**Neal Cooksey:** Okay

**00:21:41**

**Sara Wood:** And if there is anything else you want to add please feel free.

**00:21:45**

**Neal Cooksey:** No, not right now. I got to you know so much stuff on my mind. I got to go and get more stuff done and get the boys to clean that cabin up and get my grocery list made up so I can get groceries tomorrow. [*Sighs*] A never-ending moment. All right. Take care.

**00:22:03**

**Sara Wood:** Thank you, Neal.

**00:22:04**

**Neal Cooksey:** Okay.

**00:22:04**

**[End Neal Cooksey Interview]**